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SUBJECT: FEWER RUSSIANS MAKING CROSS-RIVER TRIP TO CHINA

REF: VLADIVOSTOK 034

¶1. During a trip to Blagoveshchensk on the Amur River border with China, two mission Russia FSNs -- one from Vladivostok and one from Moscow -- made a boat trip to Heihe, China to observe cross-border traffic. The excursion provided a unique opportunity to report on activity there, since diplomats are not permitted to make the trip. Though the city of Heihe is visible across the banks of the river from Blagoveshchensk, there was surprisingly little passenger traffic between the two.

¶2. The city of Heihe, China (population 113,000) is clearly visible from the banks of the Amur River in Blagoveshchensk (219,000), and could easily be reached by foot on the frozen river. Getting there is relatively easy. First, passengers are required to pay a port service fee of 800 rubles (USD 23) at the boat terminal. Passengers then choose their method of transportation, though not all are available year round. For this trip, which was taking place during the spring thaw, the only means of transport capable of crossing the weakened ice and patches of open water was an 18-seat Puma-type hovercraft. During winter when the river is completely frozen, buses are available, and when the river is completely thawed during the warm months, a traditional passenger vessel is used. The price for a round trip journey on the Puma, which takes just a few minutes, was 600 rubles (USD 18). The other modes are less expensive.

¶3. Diplomats are not permitted to cross into China by road or boat, but visa requirements for local residents are relatively easy. Individual travelers who are residents of Blagoveshchensk and parts of Amur Oblast, or groups of five or more Russians are permitted to make the trip to Heihe and its immediate surroundings without a visa. Other individual Russian citizens require visas to visit the city of Heihe proper, but are permitted to visit a smaller island in the Amur just outside of Heihe without visas provided they do not spend the night there. The Puma and other modes of transport stop at the island, from which those who meet visa requirements can cross a pedestrian bridge to the city. The FSNs stayed on the island, which has two large shopping centers packed with Chinese goods catering to Russian shoppers, and several restaurants mostly populated by locals.

¶4. Business at the river border station was surprisingly slow. Only about ten Russians made the trip to the island, and about forty Russians and a handful of Chinese went to the city. Locals in Blagoveshchensk reported that the number of Russians bound for China has dropped considerably in recent months, down from 5,000 people per day on weekends to about 50 per day. In the past, traffic was so frequent on the river that it would take several hours for travelers to pass through customs upon return to Russia. For this excursion, border formalities lasted just a few minutes.

¶5. Though the general economic downturn certainly plays a role in the slowdown, recent Russian government policies are also to

blame. First, the recent increase of import fees for used Japanese cars has severely hurt a significant segment of the Amur region which relied on the trade. Perhaps more important is the crackdown on 'pomogaiki' (reftel) who receive subsidized trips to China from Russia-based retailers in return for carrying goods back for resale. Customs officials initiated the crackdown saying that these compensated traders violated rules that allow travelers to import goods duty-free for personal use, not for resale. Being a pomogaika is often the only source of income for rural residents near the border and they made up a large proportion of the cross-border traffic.

Comment

¶6. Considering the proximity of Russian and Chinese population centers along the border, there is surprisingly little traffic between them. Though there was a significant amount of shuttle trading while the economy was in better health, most of the exchange along the border is small-scale. Private vehicles are not allowed to cross the border and there are no bridges -- even for pedestrians -- directly connecting population centers across the river. The situation highlights the arm's length approach that authorities from both sides are taking towards their neighbors on the other side.

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